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10 April 1967

INTELLIGENCE MEMORANDUM

Viet Cong Problems and Morale

1. The particularly large number of Viet Cong documents captured during several recent large-scale allied military operations have provided a far better picture of the status of the Communists in South Vietnam--their difficulties, their strengths, and their plans for the future--than has ever before been available. Most of this evidence paints a not-too-optimistic picture for the Viet Cong. The sum total of the Communists' own indictment of their operations, together with the allies' gains in population controlled, and the record numbers of soldiers and political cadres who are defecting to the government all point to a serious decrease in the Communists' ability to maintain the scope of their previous activities.

2. The official South Vietnamese Government figures indicate that population under government control has increased during the past two years from approximately 35 percent in February 1965 to some 60 percent at present, while the Viet Cong-controlled population has shown a corresponding decrease from some 23 percent to the present 17 percent. Although official, these figures are not an exact record because the criteria for determining secured population have changed several times in the last few years. They do, however, give a fairly accurate idea of the gains made in pacification.

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3. Even more dramatic gains are being made in the Chieu Hoi program. Totals of military and political defectors broke records for three successive weeks in February and March, and figures during the first three months of 1967 show a 94 percent increase over the corresponding period last year. The monthly Chieu Hoi defection rate is now almost equal proportionately to the desertion rate of ARVN and the Regional and Popular Forces, which has always been considered unreasonably high. It should also be kept in mind that Chieu Hoi figures do not take into account those Viet Cong who desert but do not turn themselves in to the government.

4. An outline of the Viet Cong situation in the III Corps area provides a fairly comprehensive picture of many of the causes of these Communist setbacks. It should be emphasized, however, that although many of the problems facing the Viet Cong in this area also apply throughout the country, the situation in III Corps, as described here, should not be taken as typical of the entire country. The Viet Cong have encountered greater difficulties in III Corps than elsewhere primarily because of the preponderance of allied troops in the area, the constant harassment of Viet Cong positions and bases by allied forces, and the continuing--and in recent months increasingly successful--pacification efforts.

5. The great majority of documents taken in the III Corps area which detail the Viet Cong's problems and shortcomings attribute their failures to allied sweeps and Revolutionary Development advances. The most serious effects of these allied gains appear to be lowered Communist morale and dwindling popular support, which are in large measure interacting. Poor morale is difficult to hide from the population and tends to lower the prestige of the Viet Cong, and waning popular support, in turn, hurts the Communists' morale.

[Redacted]

6. In captured documents, the most frequently mentioned evidences of poor morale are a general fear of the hardships of war, more specific fear of napalm attacks and B-52 strikes--sometimes to the point of panic--and unhappiness at the prospect of a long struggle. Soldiers are beginning to show a very "unrevolutionary" tendency to place primary importance on their own safety rather than on the prosecution of their struggle. Guerrillas have on occasion simply refused to fight, and several documents cite instances of troops--in one case an entire platoon--abandoning the battlefield and leaving their weapons behind. In early January Communists as high ranking as company commanders from the 9th Viet Cong Division were demoted for fleeing under fire.

7. On the subject of morale problems at high levels, two Central Office for South Vietnam (COSVN) documents of very recent date spoke of worries among cadres in subordinate agencies that a 10- or 20-year struggle would prevent older cadres from seeing the war through to the end. These same men also shared lower-level soldiers' and cadres' fears of allied military prowess and were concerned that the turmoil in China would adversely affect the struggle in Vietnam. Thus far, we have received only summaries of these two documents and it is not yet clear exactly what subordinate agencies these cadres belong to or just how high ranking they are. The documents did originate with a COSVN department, however, and it is interesting--if not overly significant--that cadres high enough to come to COSVN's direct attention should be showing signs of worry. It is reasonably certain, however, that discontent in the higher echelons is not--and probably will not be--a very large problem and can be fairly easily controlled.

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8. It is difficult to measure exactly the effects of allied psywar, civic action, and other pacification activities on Viet Cong morale, but it can be said with certainty that they are achieving some degree of success in III Corps. A COSVN Military Affairs Section document, for example, recently reported the "widespread practice" among cadres and troops of listening to Radio Saigon and reading government newspapers, and noted that strict measures to stop it had been ordered. Another document from Binh Duong Province reported that during the first six months of 1966, 115 local force and irregular troops had deserted, most as the direct result of allied psywar operations. These are only two of several documented examples of the effectiveness of these allied activities.

9. Friction among the Communists--which is both a cause and an effect of poor morale--is also becoming evident in the III Corps area, either because of jurisdictional jealousies, regional differences, or simple cases of frayed nerves. There have been instances of poor coordination between Viet Cong provinces or refusal by one province to cooperate with another. In addition, a document from Binh Duong Province recently complained that soldiers and cadres from Region IV--the area surrounding Saigon--were operating in Binh Duong without authorization and causing difficulties for units assigned to Binh Duong.

10. Integrated Viet Cong/North Vietnamese Army units are also having their difficulties because of traditional regional jealousies. Southern Viet Cong are angered by arrogance and superiority shown by northerners and resent the fact that many northerners new to South Vietnam have been put in positions of command. The Communists will probably never be able to resolve it completely because petty jealousy appears to be part of the Vietnamese nature, but strict party control and disciplinary measures will no doubt be able to keep the friction from becoming widespread enough to cause any major difficulties.

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11. According to captured documents, there has been at least one instance of fighting among Viet Cong troops in III Corps. The cause of the dispute is not evident from the document, and apparently it did not amount to more than a small squabble, but it is an indication of the tension and irritability which is probably increasingly affecting Viet Cong troops.

12. This same irritability also appears to be affecting the Communists' relations with the population under their control in the III Corps area. There has been petty bickering with the people, and troops have fired on local inhabitants apparently for no other reason than a fit of momentary pique. The Viet Cong are also beginning to steal property from the people and thereby incurring the population's wrath. By the Communists' own statement, many people have begun urging their Viet Cong relatives to leave the Communists and return home; refugees are not responding to Viet Cong offers of agricultural loans designed to induce these people to return to Viet Cong areas; and people in Communist-dominated areas are more and more frequently attempting to avoid the Viet Cong operating in their neighborhoods.

13. The Communists are losing a large portion of their popular base through the movement of refugees to government-controlled areas. Approximately 1.6 million refugees have left Viet Cong areas throughout the country since 1964, and 700,000 left in 1966 alone. This does not mean, of course, that this many Communist sympathizers have changed their allegiance. A large proportion of the refugees left only to avoid allied military operations and air strikes in their areas and not necessarily because of disaffection with the Viet Cong; but, by the same token, Viet Cong coercion and intimidation have taken their toll in terms of popular support.

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17. There have been some administrative reorganizations and cut-backs recently which are designed to release administrative cadres for combat duty. This occurred in November 1966 when the Viet Cong provinces of Binh Duong and Phuoc Thanh were merged into one province, Thu Dau Mot. There has also been some indication from documents that a similar merger has occurred with Ba Ria (GVN Phuoc Tuy), Bien Hoa, and part of Long Khanh Province, although the information on this is not yet firm. In addition, other documents have reflected what appears to be a COSVN order that all administrative agencies release as many personnel as possible for combat, but evidence on this too is not yet firm.

18. It should be emphasized again that the situation as outlined in III Corps does not necessarily apply overall throughout the country. Many of the problems existing here are worse elsewhere in the country, and many are less serious in other areas. This resume does, however, give a picture of the types of difficulties facing the Communists and the extent to which they can affect Communist operations.

19. The only conclusion which can be reached from this is that the Communists are facing serious problems and that much of the time and energy which they might better spend in carrying out their struggle will have to be devoted to overcoming their weaknesses. The Communists are not, however, in danger of their political lives and they will not collapse in the foreseeable future. They have already lost ground and will probably continue to do so, but the situation from their point of view is far from gloomy. Their strong-arm measures to gain what they want from the population will continue to bring them some benefits, and they are still capable of conducting intense guerrilla and terrorist activities and--at least to a limited extent--larger scale military operations.